

The History and Development of Hokkaido Pottery

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It wasn't until the 15th century that the first so-called *Wa-Jin* (Japanese people) started living in Hokkaido. Prior to that Japan's northernmost island was inhabited by the indigenous Ainu people, who had a culture all their own. It took another four centuries—from the end of Edo period (1615-1868) to early Meiji period (1868-1912)—before more Japanese came from all over Japan to settle in Hokkaido. For the next 150 years, the culture of people from a variety of regions around Japan has continued to unite and evolve there, creating a distinctive culture peculiar to Hokkaido.

The history of the development of pottery-making in Hokkaido is no exception, as techniques and styles from a variety of locations have combined to form a regional ceramic style all its own. In 1859, Hokkaido's first kiln was built in Hakodate by a potter from Mino (Gifu), and potters from other locations, such as Tokoname (Aichi), Kaga (Ishikawa), Echigo (Niigata) opened their own kilns throughout Hokkaido. Although their efforts did not succeed in establishing a major ceramics industry in Hokkaido, the potters in this cold, snowy environment brought forth their own unique style, which has continued to evolve to the present day.

The Hokkaido Industrial Laboratory, which opened in 1923, had a pottery section which made efforts at research and testing, as well as in guidance. By this time, the first generation of Hokkaido-born potters were beginning to gain attention. During the high economic growth period of the 1960s, an increasing number of pottery collectors and the boom in the popularity of folk art helped the success of the pottery industry throughout Japan. As a result, many professional potters who had been trained in various potteries and ceramic research centers nationwide throughout Japan, began to flourish in Hokkaido, .

In 1968, the Hokkaido Pottery Society was established by the leading potters in Hokkaido. Initially begun as a community-based club for potters, the role of the group expanded to include the gathering and dissemination of ceramic research and information, until the Society became the center of the world of ceramics in Hokkaido.

Hokkaido pottery is characterized by its diversity and free thinking. During the Edo period in all parts of Japan except Hokkaido, potters were under the strict control of the feudal economy which limited any free exchange of technical information among the various regions. This system forced regional potters to maintain strict local traditions, whereas Hokkaido pottery was born of a variety of styles. In the modern world, innovative ideas are valued more than hidden and sealed traditions. The potters of Hokkaido come from various backgrounds, from conventional pottery apprenticeships to academic training in studio art. This open style also gives potters the freedom to use not only Hokkaido clays, but also other types of clay from elsewhere in Japan, a freedom which extends to the use of various glazes and designs. In a sense, Hokkaido pottery has evolved its own distinctively new ceramic culture, building upon older ceramic traditions from throughout Japan.